



# 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope'.

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Reflections on the Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups in Promoting Reconciliation about and in the Troubled Middle East, Shavuot / Pentecost - 2013/5773

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **1. Introduction**

In response to requests from national member organizations, the ICCJ Executive Board, including the co-chairs of ICCJ's International Abrahamic Forum, met in London from 11-15 February 2013 to discuss the polarization triggered by the protracted conflicts in the Middle East, especially the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. We decided to circulate these reflections as a resource for the member organizations and to issue them publicly in hopes of being of wider service. We draw upon our decades of experience in promoting Jewish-Christian amity, and are guided by the Mission Statement of the ICCJ.

### **2. ICCJ's Mission and Legacy**

ICCJ promotes understanding and cooperation between Christians and Jews based on respect for each other's traditions, identity, and integrity. Our International Abrahamic Forum pursues trilateral interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

We recognize that intractable political and legal disputes will be resolved not by religious groups living thousands of miles away, but by political and diplomatic leaders and citizens on the ground, with the aid of the international community. We know that a bewildering array of partisans propagate misinformation, polemic, and appeals to fears and bigotry that draw upon antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian stereotypes. We also are painfully aware that religious traditions can be put to destructive ends.

Still, we are convinced that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have the capacity and indeed the responsibility before God to draw upon their respective religious heritages in the service of peace and human reconciliation. This can happen through the kind of dialogue that fosters reconciliation among estranged or hostile people, a dialogue that requires all participants consciously see each other as equally God's children.

In today's contentious context, this vision may seem naïve or be disparaged as a corrosive interreligious or ecumenical 'bargain' or as disloyal to one side or the other. To us such criticisms reflect a binary way of thinking that insists that people must be either 'pro-Palestinian' or 'pro-Israel'. We espouse a 'pro-people' vision that is both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, precisely because dialogue demands that multiple narratives be heard.

Our perspectives flow from our mission to be a sanctuary of trust where fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes can be exchanged. We invite our national member organizations to continue to pursue this goal as well. Although we have made great strides in recent decades in promoting interreligious understanding, the future requires religious people everywhere to become better and better agents of dialogue.

### **3. Recent ICCJ Efforts Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

Through statements such as 2009's 'A Time for Recommitment' and 2010's 'Let Us Have Mercy Upon Words', through conferences such as 2009's 'From Two Narratives to Building a Culture of Peace', and conversations with Palestinian Christians in 2011, ICCJ has consistently advocated for bilateral and trilateral interreligious dialogues to contribute to peace by eliminating caricatures and promoting authentic mutual understanding.

Regrettably, it seems to us that some recent statements emanating from the Middle East and elsewhere are becoming more intransigent. ICCJ believes that one-sided declarations only provoke insecurity and fear, and so do not increase the likelihood of peace.

Having said this, however, we must also state our conviction that the persistent failure to resolve the issues between Israelis and Palestinians, and between Israel and neighbouring states, is increasingly dangerous and untenable. We have no interest in apportioning blame among the many parties who have contributed over the decades to bringing circumstances to their present impasse. We simply long for the end of the current situation.

### **4. A Growing Urgency**

During the discussions of the ICCJ Executive Board in London, there was a general consensus that the status quo is intolerable. We noted several reasons, including the unjust stateless condition of Palestinians; increasing antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Christian rhetoric; the growing risk of widespread violence; and mounting frustration that leads more and more people to embrace simplistic 'solutions'.

ICCJ is convinced that despair is not an option. In the words of Bishop Munib A. Younan, Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem, 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope', which, of course, applies across the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

### **5. Putting Discussions of the Middle East into Context**

Although we have all learned from interreligious dialogue that participants bring different agendas, perceptions, and vocabularies to the encounter, these lessons often seem forgotten when turning to volatile Middle East topics. We discussed this in connection with specific terms: Israel, Holy Land, Zionism, and prophecy. In the full text of these reflections, we explore the varying connotations of each of these phrases.

### **6. General Perspectives**

The Executive Board sought consensus on some general principles that it could use to guide its own activities and that might also provide helpful suggestions for ICCJ member organizations. In outline form, these are:

- A. If people committed to profound interreligious friendships avoid or ignore subjects of great importance, they risk reducing these friendships to superficial relationships.
- B. Conversations about the convoluted Middle East conflicts need to be carefully defined and structured.
- C. We recognise that dialogues that do not consciously reckon with unequal power relationships can actually help preserve inequitable situations.
- D. Any particular proposals for action should be assessed as to whether they will increase feelings of fear or insecurity, will polarize, or seem to represent only one of the many narratives of the conflicts.

E. We are highly sceptical of simplistic proposals presented as 'the solution' to the present impasse. Only a comprehensive and complex process will be effective and lasting. Such a process must occur in the political and diplomatic realms where it is axiomatic that when legitimate rights clash, compromise is necessary.

F. We believe that people discussing the Middle East need to recognize the complex history that led to the present situation and be open to hearing multiple narratives. They should be aware that what is a minority perspective in one context can become the majority perspective if the context shifts. All need to become conscious of their unconscious biases.

G. Frequently in dialogue, the crucial factor is not what someone says but how they are heard. Patience in bringing to light such miscommunication is an urgent priority.

## **7. The Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups**

Religious groups and interreligious groups such as ICCJ will not resolve a conflict that is geopolitical in nature. As frustrating as it is, solutions lie in the purview of governments, diplomats, and political leaders.

We should, naturally, urge our respective governments to take steps that promote peace and criticize actions that aggravate the conflict. However, we believe that such political actions should neither be couched in self-serving religious appeals, nor based on one-dimensional perspectives that do not reckon with the many legitimate and contradictory rights of all involved in the conflict. We believe that all religious persons, wherever they live, should above all promote understanding and reconciliation.

For us this occurs through dialogue, and dialogue requires an openness to changing our own hearts because of what we have learned from others' hearts. Therefore, we reject current appeals to resist 'normalization' when that term means to end all conversation or interaction that might lead to independent Israeli and Palestinian states. We agree that the status quo is neither 'normal' nor acceptable, and that seeking to impose a solution that is not based on the agreement of all relevant parties is futile.

We know from experience that substantive dialogue demands a willingness to be self-critical, to examine our own consciences, to engage in a reckoning of the soul. In our discussions, we felt the need to ponder the potential to promote bigotry or intolerance within our respective religious traditions. This led us to offer specific suggestions to Jews, Christians, and Muslims that are described in the full text of these reflections.

We believe the primary role the 'Abrahamic' religions should play with respect to the Middle East is the promotion of reconciliation and peace among their three traditions. Due to historical memories and the woundedness of all the peoples concerned, this is not an easy task. We encourage religious thinkers to enhance the elements in all three traditions that foster mutual esteem and respect, and to pursue what might be called a 'theology of belonging'. This theology, which involves the self-identities of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, would recognize that all three communities 'belong' in the Land that, in different ways, is holy to them.

## **8. Invitation to Dialogue**

The reflections conclude with the urgent call for everyone committed to interreligious amity, for everyone who cares about the 'Holy Land', not to lose hope. The difficult path of dialogue is the only sure road to reconciliation. We appeal to Jews, Christians, and Muslims everywhere to speak to one another and to be open to one another, setting aside the temptations of polemic and bigotry and stereotype in the service of the peace.

After extending a number of specific invitations to further dialogue, the reflections offer the prayer

that it be God's will, insha'Allah, that heavenly peace will soon embrace all the peoples of the Middle East. Despite the hardships, we believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims must constantly struggle toward reconciliation, relying on God's help to do so because: 'As long as you believe in a living God, you must have hope'.

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